

First Marriage Horror and Second Marriage Glory

Romans 7:1-6

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The title of my message is, *First Marriage Horror and Second Marriage Glory*. Before you see the title and think this is some kind of sick marriage sermon, the title comes from an illustration in Romans 7 that is not mine; it is the Apostle Paul's, and through inspiration, the Holy Spirit's. So, don't be mad at me. I'd say be mad at Paul and the Holy Spirit, but then I don't think that's a good idea either. Do I have you all interested now?

How do writers and philosophers often explain complex truths? They illustrate. Even Jesus did. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed or like seeds falling along a path. The Pharisees are like whitewashed tombs, etc. These illustrations then correlate in some way to the truth being explained. Pastors do the same, often by telling stories, for example, about their incredibly cute and funny 5- and 3-year-old daughters.

Paul has taken chapters 2-6 to explain how obeying the law of God cannot gain us the righteousness needed to stand before God. It can't save us and instead it becomes what condemns us. By its holy standard, none of us are righteous and we all fall short of God's glory. Here in the 21st century, especially with five centuries of Protestant Reformation truth behind us, that is not new news. Yet, why go to such great length of explanation on the law's deficiency as a basis for relationship with God?

For anyone with a Jewish faith background, the law was everything. It established not only what being Jewish meant, but also how Jews relate to God. It was the whole basis for everything important. Imagine that I got up and said, *I have a new way for you to be an American, but first we have to eliminate the Constitution of the United States*. How can you eliminate the Constitution? It is the foundational document of what it means to be American in the first place. We can't imagine being an American without the Constitution, and the Jewish people couldn't imagine being Jews without the Law of Moses as the prime identity.

That's how Jews heard Paul when he said, we can have right standing with God apart from fulfilling the law of God. That's so very difficult for them to understand even to this day.

When you understand that, now Paul's approach here is understandable. Further, it's not just Jews who are in view, but any religious person who seeks approval by God based on outward righteousness. The religions of the world, and some corrupt forms of Christianity teach a works-based righteousness before God. They preach our doings as the basis for our hope for heaven, nirvana, or whatever afterlife they preach. To all of them Romans says, *we all fall short of God's glory* (3:23). Hear Paul's illustration of first marriage horror and second marriage glory with this in mind.

"Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress." (Romans 7:1-3 ESV)

Remember, this is a long doctrinal letter to a specific audience. We know Paul would contextualize his message depending on the audience. At Mars Hill with the Greek philosophy crowd of Athens listening, he didn't quote the Old Testament or refer to the law at all. He sought to persuade them from their religious curiosity and natural theology.

But in the Roman Church there were, what he calls in verse 1, "*those who know the law.*" These are Jewish converts and God-fearing Gentiles who also studied the Old Testament law. His proposition is that duty to the law only applies as long as one is alive. Dead people don't pay taxes. Their only remaining responsibility is voting in Chicago elections.

Where he is going here is that obedience to the law of God as a condition for right standing before God doesn't apply because we died with Jesus when he died on the cross. Death annuls our responsibility to the law. How he illustrates this is with marriage. He begins with what everybody knows and agrees on, "*For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives.*" (Romans 7:2) As long as her husband is alive, she remains a wife—his wife. Marriage binds them together.

"*But if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage.*" (Romans 7:2) Again, all would agree. If a husband dies, the wife is released from that covenantal vow and relationship. Her identity is no longer as a wife to that husband. She keeps his name and certainly keeps her love. But from the perspective of the law, the law is no longer binding.

"*Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.*" (Romans 7:3) Once a husband dies, from that moment she is free from responsibility to that marriage.

I had lunch with a pastor recently. For whatever reason we got talking about what happens to our churches should we die. Then it went to marriage and he said that he tells his wife, "My only requirement is that you grieve for three days; any moment after that; marry jolly well who you want to."

Three days? If a wife married another man the day after the funeral, we could call it unseemly. We could call it ill-mannered. We could call it bad taste. But what you can't call it is adultery. Why? The law binding the wife no longer applies. Her identity has changed. Her relationship to the first marriage is fundamentally altered and ended.

"*Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.*" (Romans 7:4) In the marriage illustration, we are the wife. The law was our first husband. Death ended that relationship to the law. Jesus' death ended it. We are no longer bound to the law for right standing before God.

Why? Death ends the relationship. Here's Paul's point: when Jesus died, through union with Christ, we died with him. The cross and our unity by faith to Jesus ended our relationship to the law. It is no longer binding both for death (6:23) and obedience to the law as the basis for right standing before God. We died to our first marriage to Mr. Law. In this case, we didn't wait three days; the ending of the first marriage immediately began the second. Faith in Christ unites us with the death that ended the law's condemnation and we immediately walked the aisle and were married/united with Jesus in our second marriage. The old marriage was shame and death. The new marriage is new life and eternal life.

See both the cross and the resurrection in verse 4. We died to the law through the body of Christ. That is, the literal body of Christ which died on Calvary, so that we belong to another, "to him who has been raised from the dead." Resurrection. "In order that," purpose statement, "we may bear fruit for God." Our first marriage bore fruit, not for God, but for self, sin, and Satan. It was a terrible marriage and it bore terrible fruit.

But the second marriage is glorious, eternal, and bears fruit for God. My first marriage fell short of the glory of God; my second spiritual marriage glorifies God.

You have probably noticed that we have all these people moving from Illinois to Indiana.¹ Why? We could imagine it being the nice people or the nice towns, but the real reason is the nice taxes. Jennifer and I had a group to our house not too long ago. All new people to our church. I think we had 22 people. We went around the table doing introductions, and half of them said, *we moved here because of the Illinois taxes*. They were fleeing the Illinois tax laws. Once they are residents in Indiana, they are free from the old Illinois law. You were married to Illinois, but now you are married to Indiana. Hello Mrs. Hoosier. First marriage was horror. Second marriage is glory! (They will probably have to edit that out of the radio broadcast.)

For the illustration to be accurate, the Illinois taxes would have to be 1 million percent. The tax debt completely unpayable and insurmountable (like our debt to the law of God). The Indiana tax would have to be not just 0 percent. To fit the analogy, if you live in Indiana, somebody else would have paid all your taxes for all your life and you live here for free forever. Illinois would be death and taxes. Indiana would have to be heaven. But that can't be. Is this heaven? No, that's Iowa.

But if it was, if living in Indiana was literally heaven with no taxes, what would we say to someone who kept sending money to the Illinois IRS? *Why are you doing that? Don't you realize you don't live there anymore? And because you don't live there anymore you aren't beholden to Illinois law! Live like a Hoosier now. Breathe the free air!*

Through Christ, our spiritual residency is the home of a new and far better husband, and through this new relationship to God, apart from the law, we can bear fruit in our lives that pleases and glorifies God.

"For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death." (Romans 7:5) What was so bad about the old marriage to the law? Rather than bearing fruit for God or goodness, we bore fruit for sin and death. This little paradigm in verse 5 will be greatly expanded on in chapter 7. Basically, it's how sinners sin. Notice, *"while we were living in the flesh."* That is not flesh-bodies, but our carnal selves. Our sinful selves. The spiritual me prior to God's grace. These sinful passions were constantly tormenting and tempting me to sin. My nature was to sin. You add the law and these sinful desires are "aroused." The law makes us want to sin even more.

What do we feel inside when someone tells us NOT to do something? It makes us want to do it even more. I grew up outside of town and we had a couple acres and a couple horses. To keep the horses in, we had electric fences. They're unpleasant for horses to touch and unpleasant for children too. One legendary story in my family involved my brother Scott. I, of course, was an angelic child. Scott was the demonic child. So, one day when Scott little, my dad took him to the fence and said, *Don't touch the fence. It will hurt*. He and my mom walked around the corner of the house and my Dad said, *watch this*. Sure enough, five

¹ See seed thought from Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans*, p. 224.

seconds later, out comes a scream. Why did Scott want to touch it? Sin nature combined with moral law arouses desire to do the thing we are not to do. Without God's grace we are in bondage to this way of living – God's law showing the path of goodness, but our sin nature wants the opposite.

"But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code." (Romans 7:6) Hear the marriage illustration here? We are released from our first marriage to the law.

How? *"Having died to that which held us captive."* Our first marriage was captivity, bondage, a prison. But now we are released from all that by union with Jesus on the cross. *"Released"* is used in verse 2 for the wife free from her first marriage and used again here for the Christian *released* from fulfilling the law as the condition for salvation. That's a powerful picture and one that I want to urge joy in every Christian's heart today. You have been released. You have been set free. God's grace is not freedom to sin, it is freedom NOT to sin and freedom to please God with our lives.

Think of people's joy in being released from human slavery or prison. I think of Ben Hur escaping the galley slave life on the Roman ships or Edmund Dantès swimming to freedom from the prison in the Count of Monte Cristo or this image below from the movie, *Shawshank Redemption*.



Christian, our joy should be far greater than release from Shawshank prison for all its horrors. Shawshank is no hell. Our "release" is from something far worse than Shawshank. We were not just set free. We are instantly entering a new identity with Jesus that creates a whole new approach to life. It's what he calls here, *"the new way of the Spirit."* The old way was a written code; an exterior code that could only condemn us. That was our first marriage. Horrible.

But the new marriage is not one of enslavement, but of freedom to serve God by the Spirit of God. This is God working from within us. God's Spirit indwelling us and changing us from the inside out. That's part of the glory of true Christianity. Religions of the world and corrupt expressions of Christianity can only manipulate and control by heaping up rules of moral conformity. Do this and do that and if you do enough of it well then maybe it's heaven for you.

Christianity says, we died to the rule-based righteousness when Jesus fulfilled the law and died in our place. True Christianity is motivated *internally* and bears fruit *externally*. Religion tries the opposite. It motivates externally and hopes for internal fruit. Christianity motivates internally and bears external fruit.

John Piper calls this the difference between tinsel on a Christmas tree and apples on a planted tree.² As you put up your Christmas tree, think about this. The tree is dead. All you can do is decorate the outside. Tinsel and lights and trimmings are all trying very hard to make a dead tree appear alive. There's no tinsel on the trees at the orchard. What is on the trees at the orchard? Fruit! There you find apples and oranges and cherries. Why? The trees are inwardly alive. There's roots and sap and therefore, fruit.

Religion tries to make dead trees appear alive. Christianity doesn't have to fake anything. Which one describes your life? Tinsel or apples? Lights or cherries? Dead tree or apple tree?

Commentators note that 7:7-25 is a giant parenthesis. The next verse in the flow of Paul's thought is Romans 8:1, "*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.*" (Romans 8:1-2) That's the point and truly is the question. Are we in the first marriage or the second? Illinois or Indiana? Tinsel or apples? Condemnation by the law or set free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death?

My aim is for every Christian here to rejoice in the new and to bear fruit for God as the expression of this new life. Inside your heart, I want you to have that Shawshank joy of release from the prison of death and freedom of new life in Christ. Is that your heart today?

My second aim is to whisper to the spiritual galley slaves, *you don't have to be here. Sin is shackles. Sin is slavery. Come on Ben Hur, let's get out of here. Jesus is glorious. How? There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. You have to be in Christ Jesus. In relationship. In unity. The Bible is equally clear that this change of status becomes ours when we repent of the lifestyle of sin and place our personal trust in Jesus as our Savior and Lord. End the marriage to the law. Begin the new and far better relationship with Jesus who fulfilled the law for you and died on the cross to end your slavery to sin. Step into the light. Breathe the air of freedom.*

***Run, John, run, the law commands
But gives us neither feet nor hands.
Far better news the gospel brings:
It bids us fly and gives us wings.³***

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² John Piper, "Dead to the Law, Serving in the Spirit, Part 1," www.desiringgod.org, January 28, 2001.

³ Quote usually attributed to John Bunyan

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